PEACEABLE KINGDOM

December 7, 1986, 11;00 a.m. Worship Service

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Isaiah 11:1-10
Matthew 3:1-12

"The wolf shall dwell with the lamb.... They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain;..." --Isaiah 11:6,9 (RSV)

I love this city. I love everything about it... lights and noise and energy and art and music and sports, but I think what I love best about the city and where I live in the city is the zoo. Who would have thought that you could take an evening walk in the summer along a high density, high-rise, residential neighborhood and hear lions roar? Or on a morning jog through the park see, a hundred yards away, a wonderful silver-back lowland gorilla sitting in his tree-like perch, placidly and regally pondering the traffic on Lake Shore Drive? Or during a free hour actually go find out what the mystic artist/poet William Blake meant...

"Tiger! Tiger! burning bright
In the forests of the night
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

"When the stars threw down their spears
And watered heaven with their tears,
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?"
[Songs of Experience, "The Tiger," stanzas 1, 5]

I have always sensed that there is something sacred going on when we enter into the mystery and wonder of life expressed in those amazing animals: that the zoos - for all the wretched treatment and confinement of life, and for all their exploitation and pandering to curiosity, nevertheless offered the opportunity to know something wonderful about creation and ourselves and, if you will, about God.

By what amazing grace do we share the earth with gorillas and snow leopards and polar bears? By what astonishing and loving creativity do we share life with rhinoceroses and whales and wolves? By what wonderful benevolence are we co-habitants with lambs and lions?

2,700 years ago a Hebrew prophet with a fine poetic touch, and a knowledgeable sense of the natural order, wrote an oracle about how it would be when God provides a perfect ruler for the people. There will be justice for all, he promised. Knowledge of God will fill the earth and as a result there will be so much peace that even the terrifying wild beasts will become friendly; natural enemies will lie down together, adversaries will share their food, and the weakest and most vulnerable of all, the children, will be safe. Isaiah, the gifted prophet of Jerusalem, 700 years before Christ, looked out at a world full of violence, threat of war, oppression and exploitation by the frightfully powerful Assyrian empire and penned a vision of a peaceable kingdom, the literary beauty of which is breathtaking, the hope of which is stirring, and the distance from the reality of the world so great that once we have recited the poetry and admired the pretty picture, we are not at all sure what to make of it. There is a famous painting of the scene by American artist Edward Hicks... He did the scene dozens of times - wolf and lamb, leopard and kid, lion and ox... The animals in the painting have peculiarly poignant eyes...they look out at us with innocent, childlike vulnerability... the picture does not represent reality - as we know it - nor does the Isaiah passage.

Woody Allen quipped that when the lion and lamb lie down together, only the lion will get back up. "Nice guys finish last," Leo Durocher reminded us and history has been one tragic illustration after another. Living in peace - trying to live without violence is no simple matter.

To hold the vision of peace close to your heart is not necessarily to be a pacifist. The great American theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, learned that and had the courage to teach it in the days before World War II, when most of the religious intellectual community, reacting in horror to the meaningless violence unleashed in World War I, adopted pacifism: and when the political abhorrence of conflict encouraged the Nazis and when "peace at any price" was hastening the conflict. In an essay on the topic Niebuhr wrote "tyranny continues to grow if it is not registered," and "The gospel is more than the law of love. The gospel deals with the fact that men violate the law of love." [The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr, "Why the Christian Church is Pacifist," p. 107, 111]

It is an issue with which the Christian people of South Africa are stuggling. A group of representatives of South African churches, mostly the black churches, have met and drawn up a statement called the Kairos Document, the essence of which is that it is time, in the name of Jesus Christ, to resist apartheid... It is a carefully biblical statement. The National Council of Churches and McCormick Theological Seminary held a consultation on the Kairos Document in Chicago recently and I was invited to be one of the American Church representatives to respond to it. Like most white, middle class American Christians, I found myself urging moderation, patience, non-violence... But the reality of the situation is that it isn't that simple: that to be patient and non-violent in the past has been to corporate with and collaborate with oppression.

The reality of the situation, for me, was a student at the Lutheran School of Theology, a mother of three, whose husband, a Lutheran Pastor, is also a student. They are black South Africans. She spoke quietly and movingly in a small group about how her children love school in America; how they had never sat in a room with white children before. She wept when she spoke of returning home next year. "My son will be 18, ready to be recruited by the A.N.C. I do not want him to join because he may be killed, but what can I tell him?"

"When we return I will have to return to the homeland. That means that I will only see my husband two times a year when he will be permitted to visit for holiday. He will work in the city and if my son can get a job he will work in another city and will never see his father because their holidays will not be at the same time."

"You tell me to be non-violent, you tell my son to be non-violent but Gandhi was non-violent 40 years before change took place. Can I tell my children to wait - to be non-violent for 40 years? When babies die because of injustice, you tell us to wait?"

The trouble is that Isaiah's vision does not represent any reality with which we are familiar. Reality is that woman's dilemma. Reality is that the wild beasts who terrified people in the past and could be used as a powerful metaphor by the prophet - are all but gone. The reality of history is that the animals whose ferocity made them wonderful subjects for an improbably peaceable kingdom will probably not survive many more decades: wolves, lions and leopards.

We have been created for life in harmony with creator - life in peace with one another; and the essence of the human dilemma is eloquently expressed in that zoo up there. The Afghanistan Leopard, magnificent beast which Isaiah has lying down with the kid, is seriously endangered, I learned, because of the chemical weapons being used secretly in the war the Soviet Union is sustaining in Afghanistan. There is some kind of coming full circle in that, it seems.

The promise of peace is in the Bible from beginning to end. It is the hope which endures through the centuries, through the revolt in Egypt and the wars to secure the land... through centuries of wars and the centuries of brutal oppression: in moments of high courage when God's people rose up against oppressors and died for freedom - to times of desperate cruelty when they were herded into box cars to be executed by the millions. The hope never died. We were made for peace. We don't have it. We were made for that Shalom the Hebrew prophets knew to be a rich, harmonious well-being. We don't yet have it. Why not? The question must be asked...

There is nothing clearer, nor more disturbing, than the Biblical insistence that political peace is related to and results from justice. And that justice is always defined by how the poor and the weak are getting treated. Nothing so irritates Presbyterians, I have discovered, than a short course in Old Testament theology which always links peace with

justice and justice with the poor. Isaiah would have no difficulty at all sizing up urban violence, and would cut through all the sociological sophistication and the political maneuvering and suggest that what the Tribune series on public housing is really saying is that we don't have peace because we have injustice: that we are on the leading edge of human disaster because in the past several years we have decided that what the poor need is less not more concern.

We want our religion to be relevant and realistic and therefore one of the major objections to the Biblical concern for peace, and these dreams of Isaiah, are that they are too utopian, too far-out, detached from reality, too simple. The most telling objection to the utopianism expressed by the peaceable kingdom is that it creates unreal expectations and diverts attention from more critical responsibilities. That's a dandy academic question - by the way - "the uses of utopia."

What is fairly clear to me is that for a variety of reasons, mainline, middle-of-the-road Christianity doesn't talk much about the future. In an effort to be relevant and realistic we have relinquished the Biblical motif of hope and and the project has been taken up by zealous evangelical Christians and by zealous Marxists, with great success. The evangelicals propose a utopia totally outside history, after death, the proverbial "pie-in-the sky-when-you-die," which eliminates the need to worry much about mundane matters like war, poverty and injustice in the world. If history is about to end, we really don't need to worry about the oil running out, or the extinction of the big animals - or about who is oppressing whom. The Marxists, on the other hand, promise a utopia, now: a wonderful classless society in which all barriers are gone and everyone's needs are met, and there are no more adversaries. The Marxists call the other-worldly hope - the opiate of the masses. The religious zealots call the Marxist utopia an idolatry which is so intent on creating utopia that it ends up creating a new totalitarianism. Both are correct about the other. There is no voice from the middle however. There is no voice of realistic hope.

"Without a vision the people perish," the prophet wrote. Isaiah knew that vision was not a political proposal. Edward Hicks knew he wasn't drawing a blueprint for a political structure. Someone noted that a lion that lies down and eats straw with an ox is a very sick lion.

Without a vision we perish. Without hope people wither and die. Without hope people become desperate and do destructive things. Without hope people begin to act in ~~ways that~~ bring about war. The value of Isaiah's vision - professor Davie Napier suggests is "an indomitable hope - based on faith in creation's ~~ultimate~~ Goodness, the justice of ~~God's~~ purposes, and the eternal love of God revealed in Jesus Christ." [Ibid]

What has resulted is an unquenchable hope which bravely emerges in the most tragic and distressing circumstances - in concentration camps and hospital beds, in prisons, and in fox holes, that one day there will be peace... We need that hope desperately today.

+ compassion
Lafayette

Robert Jay Lifton has analyzed surveys of America's hopes for the future and has discovered that nuclear weapons and the arms race have resulted in something called "psychic numbing." We simply cannot deal with the future we have created for our children. And so part of the responsibility of those who trust the vision is to penetrate the numbness. Has the religious vision brought peace. No. No, in that it has not yet come. No, in that one day last week, almost without our noticing it, a B-52 full of cruise missiles took off and our nation violated SALT II. No, in that we have decided to mortgage the future in order to prepare for war... No, in that we have been caught selling arms to sustain a war on one continent - and used the profits to sustain a war we have created on another continent. No, and part of the duty of the church - is to point it out and lament. But yes, of course it has brought peace by letting loose in history a haunting dream, a knowledge that there is a better way. Yes, in that people of the Bible, Jews and Christians have never been content with injustice and war - because they know God's intent. Yes, in that people who have God's peace in their hearts are free enough and safe enough to become fearless peacemakers, celebrators of and advocates for peace.

What the ancient vision of Isaiah does is express humanity's dearest hope - life without fear, threat, violence. It gives us reason to rededicate ourselves to the Godly work of peacemaking and reconciliation, confident that God's spirit is on the side of peace. What it gives us is truth about the internal dynamics of peace and justice, and justice and the poor.

And one thing further. It is a blessed promise. It suggests that in God's good time that vision becomes reality, that God's peaceable kingdom is not only a promise for the future, but in a sense exists now, breaks in now. The ancient dream reminds us that God's peace is for us personally, individually as well as collectively, politically. It reminds us that to know oneself accepted and forgiven and loved by God - is to have peace which is, in fact, deeper and more profound in external circumstances.

We live most of our lives looking for that peaceable kingdom in which we know ourselves to be loved and safe and secure. We look across the years, you and I, for peace that passes understanding: for peace which stands though all else falls, for peace which will survive personal tragedy and war, sickness and the loss of our loved ones, death itself. We look - across the years - for the signs that God's peaceable kingdom is here and available to us.

And once a year we hear the story that tells us that Kingdom is here and it is so beautiful that it sounds new each time we hear it. The story has enormous human appeal, even to those who don't understand it from a theological perspective, and perhaps don't even believe.

It is a story of a peaceable kingdom, a miniature as it were, a microcosm which uses as its model that wonderful old vision of Isaiah. It happens in the City of David, the king - whose father was Jesse. It is about a branch from those roots. The story tells about a poor and

vulnerable young woman, a man who is being pushed around by the most powerful political structure the world knows. It tells about the man and woman having to stay overnight in the barn and how her baby is born that night. It tells how the cows and the lambs and the kids are there, and if you understand this story you can see around the edges, the lion and the leopard and the wolf. Like the vision of Isaiah which preceded it by seven centuries it is a mysterious story, about an unlikely event. But everyone seems to know that it is true - that vulnerability and weakness are God's way: that the hope for peace is so precious that we must hold it close - and that for all of us there are promised moments when we know ourselves to be loved and forgiven and accepted and welcomed by the one who created us... Everyone knows the story is true because it tells how angels, God's messengers, come to herald this tiny invasion into the reality of human history and how a whole multitude of them filled the sky, praising God and saying

"Glory to God in the highest
and on earth peace among all people
with whom he is pleased." Amen.